

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 24, 2023

Let it be...

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

First off, yes, I am a fan of The Beatles. So let's just get this out of the way:

[Verse 1]

When I find myself in times of trouble

Mother Mary comes to me

Speaking words of wisdom

Let it be

And in my hour of darkness

She is standing right in front of me

Speaking words of wisdom

Let it be

[Chorus]

Let it be, let it be

Let it be, let it be

Whisper words of wisdom

Let it be

Now, Paul McCartney explained in an interview with the Salt Lake tribune that the lyrics to this song came to him in a dream. He recalled, "I had a dream where my mother, who had been dead at that point for about 10 years, came to me in the dream and it was as if she could see that I was troubled. And she sort of said to me, she said, 'Let it be.' And I remember quite clearly her saying, 'Let it be,' and 'It's going to be OK. Don't worry.' You know, 'Let it be.'"¹

¹ Pierce, Scott. "Paul McCartney says...". The Salt Lake Tribune. September 9, 2011. <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=52552400&itype=CMSID>

Now I'm not so certain that "it's going to be OK" is what the Virgin Mary meant when she said to the Angel Gabriel "let it be with me according to your word."² I strongly suspect that Mary was rather concerned that things would absolutely **not** be OK. And that would be a completely reasonable concern! Let's put ourselves in Mary's shoes.

Mary is a young woman, likely in her teen years. She is promised in marriage to a man named Joseph. Now, suddenly, she has to explain to her parents, her fiancée, her friends, and her neighbors that she is mysteriously pregnant. The shame of this circumstance alone would have been a great deal to bear, but on top of that, there was a non-zero chance that she could be stoned to death. That wasn't the most likely outcome, but it was an option. Plus, this is a time in human history when childbirth was a rather dangerous proposition. Frankly, there are plenty of reasons for Mary to run away from this fate or at least to try to fight it.

Mary doesn't run or fight, but I do wonder if there wasn't some hesitancy in her. And I would certainly not blame her for that. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary and gives her a cryptic greeting that leaves her perplexed. Then, into the silence of her pondering, the angel gives his powerful announcement regarding her pregnancy. Mary, seemingly still perplexed, can only ask "how can this be?!" The angel replies with words of proof regarding Mary's aunt Elizabeth. **Then** Mary said...

I wonder how much work that word at the start of verse 38 is doing: **Then** Mary said... How much of a pause is hiding behind that word, "then"? How much time did Mary spend weighing the possible outcomes? Was she choosing her words carefully in the face of this divine messenger? Did the silence stretch on long enough to become uncomfortable as Mary considered Joseph's response...her parents'? We don't know if Mary's answer came seconds after Gabriel's momentous news or if those words took a while. But eventually they come out: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."³

Contrary to Paul McCartney's dream version of those words, that things will somehow work out ok, I hear in Mary's words a deep faith and trust in a God who is good and will be with Mary in the midst of all that she is about to experience. Gabriel never promises Mary that her journey, this calling that

² Luke 1:38c (NRSVUE)

³ *Ibid.*

she is about to embark upon, would be easy or straightforward. He only promises that God favors her and is with her. That's it. That's the extent of the reassurance Mary is offered. Now, I don't know about you, but I'd be tempted to get some concessions or something! If I'm about to bear God's only Son, I'd try for a promise of an easy delivery and a comfortable place to raise him at the very least!

Mary **doesn't** know that things are going to be ok. She is young and inexperienced. She is likely scared out of her mind! And yet she can respond to God's call with such beautiful words of faith and trust, "let it be with me according to your word." Such a powerful phrase, and one that Jesus will echo in the garden of Gethsemane where he will say, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."⁴ Both Mary and Jesus are praying that God's will for them be done. They are both worried about what their call will mean, but they both trust that God is who God says God is – a loving parental figure who will journey with them no matter where the Way takes them.

God is with Mary as she perplexedly ponders Gabriel's news. God is with Mary as she answers the call. God is with Mary as she travels to See Elizabeth. God is with Mary as she breaks the news of her pregnancy to Joseph, her parents, and the others. God is with Mary when her water breaks in a stable. God is with Mary as strange magi and shepherds come the birthplace. God is with Mary as she hears the prophetic words of Simeon and Anna. God is with Mary as she frantically searches Jerusalem for the lost Jesus. God is with Mary as she teaches and nurtures Jesus. God is with Mary as follows and listens and learns from the Messiah. God is with Mary as she witnesses his arrest, torture, and crucifixion. God is with Mary in the confusion of the empty tomb. God is with Mary.

Things aren't going to be ok for Mary. She will suffer trials and hardships. She will watch her beloved son be put to death in a most gruesome way. She can pray "let it be" not because she knows it will all be ok in the end. Instead, she can pray "let it be" because she knows that no matter what comes next, God is with her. Mary and Jesus both teach us to pray that most dangerous of prayers: "your will be done."

I dare you to pray that prayer right now! In all earnestness...God...**YOUR** will be done... not mine! That prayer rightly acknowledges who we are and who

⁴ Luke 22:42

God is. That dangerous prayer that prioritizes God's values over our own... God's desires for the world over our own... God's kingdom and God's power over our own. It is **the** prayer for followers of the Way of Christ.

"Let it be with me according to your word." "Not my will, but yours be done." "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven." These prayers all say the same, dangerous, counter-cultural thing... God is in charge and our calling is to discern God's will (made clear in the teachings of Christ) and to serve it. I don't know what the future holds... I strongly suspect all of us here today will see trials and hardships in the future. But I do know one thing... while it may not all be ok, I do know that whatever comes, God is with me... God is with us. Amen.